

**NOW IN HER
FIFTH DECADE AT
THE SCHOOL,
SHE REFUSES
TO BACK DOWN
WHEN IT COMES
TO USING THE LAW
TO PROTECT AND
PROMOTE HEALTH.**



Ruth Roemer: The Fighting Type

Here she is contributing her wisdom at a national

meeting of MergerWatch, a group concerned with how the marriage of religious and non-sectarian hospitals is affecting reproductive health. There she goes to Paris for the 9th World Conference on Tobacco or Health, playing an instrumental role in the WHO's decision to launch the first international convention on tobacco control. Now she's back in her office, banging away on her manual typewriter as she writes yet another letter of recommendation for a student. "I'll have someone who's an expert put it on the computer," she explains. She uses her computer for e-mail, but hasn't mastered spacing or attachments.

Who has time? In her fifth decade as a stalwart member of the UCLA School of Public Health faculty, Ruth Roemer continues to be here, there and everywhere, taking on Goliaths no less than the tobacco industry and anti-abortion lobby. At 86, she seems not to have slowed a step, leaving admirers challenged to find a better description than "tireless advocate," which, in Roemer's case, seems to fall short.

She was born Ruth Joy Rosenbaum in Hartford, Conn., during World War I, the first of two girls. Her father, a plant pathologist, died at age 37 of a bacterial infection following the extraction of a tooth, leaving Ruth's mother with two young children and limited means. The family settled in Milford. "It was a Republican town," Ruth recalls, smiling. "My family was sort of socialist, and I certainly was a radical."

She also was a stellar student, gaining entry into Cornell University, where her father had gotten his Ph.D. Ruth majored in English and planned to teach. But upon graduation she toured Europe with the American Student Union. It was the summer of 1936, and the clouds of fascism were all over Europe. "I came back knowing I had to do something relevant to the social conditions of the United States, which

was just coming out of the Depression, and this terrible threat of fascism in the world,” she says. “So I walked over to the [Cornell] law school and asked if they would take me.”

But she didn’t walk away from the literary world empty-handed. As an undergraduate, Ruth competed for the editorship of the *Cornell Journal of Opinion* with fellow student Milton Roemer. “Our faculty advisory committee decided to try co-editorship,” she recalls. “They joked that the co-editors would have to work closely together, but wouldn’t necessarily have to get married to do it.” Fatal words. “I had never met anyone like Milton before,” Ruth recalls. “He was taking all of these biological sciences and planning on a very strenuous career, and yet he was poetic, with a wonderful eye for art.” They married in 1939, on the day Hitler marched on Poland. Their 62-year union, which lasted until Milton’s death last year, was arguably public health’s most fruitful. “My contribution is really nothing compared to what Milton did,” Ruth insists.

That says a lot about her husband, because as a pioneer in health law, Ruth Roemer’s contributions have loomed large.

Her entry into public health was somewhat fortuitous. Roemer was a labor lawyer through the 1940s and 1950s, as her husband’s peripatetic profession took them on more than a dozen moves. One of their last stops was back in Ithaca, N.Y., where Ruth returned to Cornell Law School to work as an associate to Professor Bertram F. Willcox. There, she participated in a landmark study of the law governing the state’s admissions to mental hospitals. Her research with Willcox resulted in a book, *Mental Illness and Due Process*, that called for a transformed system in which decisions on admitting patients to mental hospitals would become initially medical, rather than legal, matters, with subsequent periodic legal reviews. Less than two years after the book was published, the New York State Legislature passed unanimously the law recommended by the study – and Roemer had found her career calling. “My feeling was that if you can do a piece of work, and not long after it’s finished, get action that improves the lives and health of people, that’s for me,” she says.

The same year the book was published, in 1962, the Roemers – who now had a son, John, and a daughter, Beth – made their final move, to Los Angeles and the UCLA School of Public Health faculty. With barely enough time to unpack, Ruth Roemer delved into one of the most controversial issues of the day. She became the principal organizer and vice president of the California Committee on Therapeutic Abortion, formed to provide public education and leadership in reform of California’s century-old abortion law. Her group spearheaded

abortion law reform in California in 1967, six years before *Roe v. Wade*.

She would make her mark in many other ways in the ensuing years: with analyses of the functions, education and regulation of health personnel; as an ardent campaigner for fluoridation of public water supplies in California and worldwide; with an early-’70s study examining the gap between the advanced technology available to curb pollution and the application of this technology to protect people’s health and living conditions; and, for the last two decades, with seminal work in tobacco control that started with a world review of tobacco control legislation, carried out for the World Health Organization and first published in 1982. That compilation and analysis proved helpful to the many countries grappling with tobacco control policies. Since then, Roemer has presented at international tobacco control conferences on five continents. In 1996, she was invited by WHO to prepare a document, in collaboration with attorney Allyn Taylor, that helped launch WHO’s first international convention on tobacco control. The treaty, which is currently being negotiated by 160 countries, will include guidelines on legislation as well as protocols for such issues as advertising, smuggling and taxation.

In the midst of all this activity there was the year (1987) she served as president of the American Public Health Association (an experience Roemer describes as “thrilling”), countless publications and a mantle-full of awards, including the APHA’s prestigious Sedgwick Memorial Medal, the UCLA Public Health Student Assn.’s Faculty of the Year Award and, most recently, the Beverlee A. Myers Award, presented by the California Department of Health Services to Ruth and her late husband Milton.

It’s difficult without Milton, she confides. Yet she presses on. With a faculty colleague, Dr. Barbara Berman, Roemer recently submitted to WHO a document entitled “Strengthening Enactment, Enforcement, and Evaluation of Tobacco Control Legislation.” Along with her tobacco work, the activities that keep her especially busy involve students. Many current and former students seek her advice. And Roemer teaches every quarter – a health law class in the fall, a course on public health ethics that she co-teaches in the winter, and a seminar for undergraduates on public health law and policy in the spring. She also helped shape a new course aimed at giving a public health perspective to pre-med students and other undergraduates.

“I guess the reason I’m here at age 86,” Ruth Roemer says, modest as ever, “is that I find it bracing to be with young people, and perhaps to help them.”

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—Ruth Roemer, J.D.
Professor Emerita